

Worms

GARY GUINN

At the wine and cheese party for the clinic staff, John described his worm farm to Doctor Miles. Three Rubbermaid Roughtote 53-liter containers, twelve inches high, sixteen inches deep, twenty-four inches long, in a neat line along the wall on the back porch. The spot was well ventilated, shaded, not too hot in the summer. In the winter he moved the bins into the utility room, next to the washer and dryer.

The new doctor at the clinic, who looked sixteen years old, joined the conversation. "Isn't the smell a problem in the house like that in the winter?"

John laughed. "No way." How many years had this guy gone to school? Anybody with a brain who lived in the real world knew Red Wigglers were odorless

"It's a business," he said. "Feed them kitchen scraps, and bingo, the worms do all the work. Low budget, no waste." Where had these guys been all their lives? The food decomposed and fed the worms, and the worm castings made tiny time-released fertilizer granules, formed by Mother Nature, not processed chemically in some laboratory. John used the fertilized compost on his flowers and sold the worms. The perfect hobby. How smart did you have to be?

John had two years at the community college and ran his own automotive shop behind his house. He told the doctors about the Red Wigglers' sensitivity to vibrations and how they moved away from light, how all he had to do was put a lamp over the compost and the

worms moved to the bottom, allowing him to harvest the compost at the top. "Vermicomposting" he said. "From the Latin 'Vermes' for worm. The Red Wiggler is 'Eisensia Foetida,' the manure worm." It was a science. Grease under his fingernails didn't mean he had no brains, no ambition.

Doctor Miles and the new doctor nodded their heads, and the new doctor chewed his lower lip.

John's wife, Clarice, had been promoted to office manager at the clinic the year before. Her with just a high school education. But she was pretty, blonde hair and a good figure. She made almost as much money as John. They were doing okay. You didn't need a medical degree to get along.

Clarice stood in a small cluster of people in the middle of the room. She watched John, her gaze steady, over the shoulder of one of the operating room nurses. He winked at her over his glass of wine.

"But how do you manage to sell worms from your house?" Doctor Miles said.

"The honor system," John said, holding his glass up close to his chest.

"Honor system?" the new doctor asked. He stepped aside to allow the X-ray tech into the circle. The X-ray tech adjusted his glasses on his nose and nodded at the new doctor.

John glanced over to see if Clarice was still watching, but she was no longer in the other group. He glanced around but didn't see her. "Put a small bin of loose compost full of worms on the front porch," he said. "Stick a sign to the front of the bin—\$2 a Pint. Little stack of pint cups. A Folgers can beside the bin with a Post-it note says 'Put money here.' Out front by the road a permanent sign—'WORMS' in big letters. An arrow pointing to the house."

Doctor Miles shook his head. The new doctor looked at the X-ray tech and smiled.

"Hey," John said and sipped his wine, "I can't be sitting out on the porch all the time waiting for someone to buy a handful of worms. I got people wanting their cars fixed yesterday."

"How does the honor system work in the winter?" the X-ray tech said. "You know, when your worms are in the laundry room?"

John held up his empty wine glass toward the X-ray tech. "Un momento," he said, then stepped over to the wine table and inspected several labels. He selected a bottle of Merlot and refilled his glass. When he came back to the group, he raised his wine to them and said "Cheers!" They all lifted their glasses and drank with him.

John pointed at the X-ray tech with the forefinger of the hand holding his wine glass. "Honor system gets suspended December through February," he said. He looked around for Clarice. He wished she was hearing all this. Then he saw her. She sat by herself in an easy chair on the far side of the room, holding her wine glass in both hands in front of her, elbows propped on the arm rests. She watched him. He motioned with his head for her to join them. The new doctor, still smiling, looked at her and raised his eyebrows.

John turned back to the X-ray tech and said, "It's a simple logistics problem." He took another drink and glanced again at Clarice. Her head was laid back and her eyes closed. He decided to finish the lecture and take her home.

"Winter months," he said, "I put a sign on the porch says 'For worms, ring doorbell and come around to the shop.' Bell's hooked up out in the shop. I'll meet them out back, take them in the back door to the laundry room, get what they want."

John and Clarice had talked about selling the house, moving into the new sub-division out by the lake. The houses there were brick with a privacy fence around the back yard. John would lease space out on the highway east of town for his shop. Businesses were doing well out there. He and Clarice had been careful with their money. "Moving up to the East Side," she called it. She said, "The move will do us good."

She seemed more enthusiastic each time they talked about it. She hadn't been so upbeat about anything in their five years of marriage. She asked some of the nurses at the clinic about a realtor. She and John finally looked at a few houses, found one they both liked.

The last time they talked about moving, the week after the wine and cheese party, everything seemed ready to go. When they sat down at the kitchen table after dinner, coffee steaming in front of them, Clarice said, "John, before we make an offer on the house, I need to know. Are you sure about this? I don't want to talk you into moving unless it's what you really want."

He had been expecting something like this. He knew her almost better than she knew herself. He pulled a piece of paper out of his hip pocket, unfolded it and pressed it out flat on the table with both hands.

"What do you think this is?" he asked, scrunching up his lips and narrowing his eyes.

Her smile was uncertain. She raised her eyebrows. "You leased a place for your shop out on the highway?"

"Nice try," he said, nodding his head, not taking his eyes from hers. "But I think you will like this even better. This will settle all your fears about pushing me into something."

He turned the paper around so that it was right side up for her and slid it across the table to her. She looked down at a set of hand-drawn plans for an expanded worm farm for the new house. Six bins tucked neatly into the laundry room between the attached garage and the kitchen. Three bins on the counter top, and three on the floor beneath. And at the bottom of the page, a rough sketch of a sign. "WORMS" in large black letters. Below that, in smaller black letters, "Red Wigglers." And below that "Clarice and John Moore." The big black arrow curved toward the left above it all. In the right margin, a scribbled note said, "In concrete."

He leaned back in his chair, took a noisy sip of coffee, and set the cup on his stomach, holding it with both hands, watching her.

The dishwasher hummed behind him. She stared at the paper lying in front of her. Her breasts rose and fell with her slow breathing. John's smile widened and he cocked his head to one side.

He leaned forward, put his elbows on the table, and said, "Does that about do it?"

She sat back in her chair and looked into one of his eyes, then the other. She put her hands up to her own eyes, rubbed them.

"Yes," she said. "That does it."

She stood up and took her coffee cup, still steaming, to the sink, where she emptied it into the drain and set the cup down. "Excuse me," she said without turning to face him. "I have to go to the bathroom."

Down the hall, the bathroom door lock clicked. John leaned forward and spun the paper around and looked at the plan, whistling silently.

Clarice did not come out of the bathroom for over an hour. When she did, John woke up in the easy chair in front of the TV. He

smiled at the familiar whistled opening to a re-run of The Andy Griffith Show. Opie threw the rock into the pond as Clarice walked down the dark hall to their bedroom.

Since the wine-and-cheese party, Clarice had gone in to work early each day, and John had worked late, overhauling the engine on a '94 El Dorado convertible. The car was cherry, only 20,000 miles in ten years, but some dufus at the Jiffy Lube hadn't tightened the oil plug. The plug had come out, drained the oil, locked up the engine. But John made a killing when some dufus screwed up. Four thousand dollars later the engine would be good as new.

The day the El Dorado had arrived at the shop, after the tow truck had disappeared down the street, John sat in the driver's seat and imagined the car was his, he and Clarice on a Sunday drive around the lake. The top down, her blonde hair blowing in the breeze. Driving slow. The sun on their faces.

Friday night, after he put the finishing touches on the engine and started it up, he stuck his head in the back door to ask Clarice if she wanted to go with him to test drive it. His dinner was laid out on the table. Clarice was watching *Wheel of Fortune* in the living room. She already had her pajamas on, didn't want to go out again.

He drove the El Dorado out the highway west of town. It was dark and too cold to put the top down.

When he got back, he washed up and took his plate into the living room with Clarice. She always watched TV in the dark when John wasn't with her. He had warned her, he didn't know how many times, that it would ruin her eyes, but all she ever said was "Old wive's tale." He turned on the lamp beside his easy chair and sat on

the other end of the couch from Clarice.

On the TV, Ella Ferguson, from Des Moines, with \$17,300 and all but three letters filled in on the big squares, spelling “GO_E WIT_ THE WI_D,” decided to take one more chance. The studio audience cheered as she reached down and spun the big wheel. It clattered around and slowed as “Bankrupt” moved toward the pointer.

“Oh, shit,” John said, his mouth full of ham sandwich, “she’s gonna lose everything.”

The pointer bent on the last pin before “Bankrupt,” and the studio audience squealed. The turnstile stopped, and the pointer eased back onto \$900.

“I’ll be damned,” John said. He took another bite of his sandwich as Ella Ferguson from Des Moines, with \$18,200, said “Gone With the Wind” and jumped up and down and hugged Pat Sajak and the other two contestants. Vanna White, her smile perfect, stood by the big board and clapped.

John finished his sandwich as the theme music played. Clarice punched a button on the remote, and the screen went dark. She tossed the remote onto the coffee table and walked down the hall, her house shoes whispering on the hardwood floor, and went into the bathroom. John took his plate and glass to the kitchen, rinsed them and put them in the dish washer, then stepped into the laundry room and lifted the lid of the first bin of worms. The odor of humus rose to his nostrils. He worked his fingers down into the loose organic material and pulled up a handful, letting the compost fall through his fingers until he grasped a fat Red Wiggler between his thumb and forefinger. The worm coiled and twisted onto itself.

"John." Clarice stood at his elbow watching the worm twist in his fingers. She opened her mouth to speak again, but John moved his eyes closer to the Red Wiggler and spoke first.

"These little guys can adapt to almost anything," he said, "except ultraviolet rays. Sun will paralyze them in an hour. Dry them right out."

"John." She turned from the worm to John and opened her mouth again to speak, but he was focused entirely on the worm wiggling in his fingers.

"Did I ever tell you," he said and held the worm up higher into the light, "that they have a very small brain? And five hearts. Five."

He slid the fingers of his other hand down the worm to stretch it out and moved it toward Clarice. "They're all heart." He laughed. "No eyes, no ears. Everything they know comes through the sense of touch." He smiled and winked at her.

Clarice leaned back against the washing machine, folded her arms across her chest, and turned her head away. "Yeah, you told me," she said.

On her days off, Clarice would put on Aerosmith, crank up the stereo, and jack the bass all the way up while she did the laundry. John could feel the vibrations of the bass notes out in the shop, like when a teenager drove slowly down the street with a trunk-full of sub-woofer, losing God knows how many decibels of hearing in an afternoon, practically sitting on the speakers. When Clarice cranked up the music too high in the house, he had to go in and remind her of how sensitive the worms were to vibration. Sometimes she would be dancing to the music with her eyes closed. She was a good dancer, sexy without being too sexy, and sometimes he would watch her for a

minute before tapping her on the shoulder, surprising her, making her scream. The first couple of years they were married she had tried to coax him to dance with her. Now at the annual dance for the clinic fund raiser, he sat and watched as she danced with the other guys.

John dropped the worm back down onto the brown bedding, and it began pushing itself below the surface.

"Their castings are toxic to their own species," he said. He put the lid back on the bin. "If you don't change the bedding it gets deadly in there." He poked her with his elbow and winked. "As my good friend Joey would say, they eat shit and die." He laughed and headed down the hall toward the living room.

Saturday morning John knew as soon as she told him she was going with him to walk the dog, when she told him they had to talk and it couldn't wait till he got back—he knew that it was something important. She never walked the dog with him. He thought it must be something at the clinic, that maybe she had lost her job. He worried sometimes about her not being up to managing the office. It was a big job.

They stopped by the mailbox at Donahue's house next door. The dog hunched up in Donahue's front yard to do his business. A car passed on the wet pavement with the sound of paper tearing.

"For Christ's sake," Clarice said. "He'll be out here screaming at us." She looked for the old man at the picture window.

The dog finished and trotted on ahead, expanding the leash to its full length. John and Clarice walked beside each other, their breath steaming out in front of them.

"What's with you?" he said.

She looked across the street, away from him, and said, "I'm leaving, John."

He slowed. "What do you mean?"

She turned to him, stopped, and grabbed the sleeve of his raincoat. "I mean I'm moving out."

"Moving out? What do you mean? Like moving out of the house?"

"It's not your fault," she said. "It's complicated."

The dog stopped and sniffed around the base of the street light.

"It? What?" he said. "What exactly is complicated? What's not my fault? Why didn't you say something?"

A gray cat lay under a shrub by the porch of the brick house on the corner, twitching its tail and staring at them. The dog strained toward it at the end of the leash.

"Why?" John said. "Tell me why."

Clarice, her hands in her rain coat pockets, stared at the sidewalk. "I need some time to myself." She looked back down the street toward their house. At the curb, water dripped from the white board sign into the mulch of the small flower bed John had planted there. The jonquils would be coming up any day now. The large black arrow, slightly curved to give it a sense of movement, pointed to the house. "It's complicated," she said.

A light rain began to fall. John started walking again and turned the corner. Without moving, Clarice called out to him, "John."

The dog continued to pull at the lead when John turned back and said, "What about selling the house and moving out by the lake?"

"I don't know," she said, looking away. "I don't know. It wouldn't work, John."

"Why not?"

"Let's go back to the house," she said. "It's starting to rain." She pulled the collar of her raincoat up to her ears.

The light drizzle spread evenly over the sidewalk, the street, the corner of brown Bermuda lawn that separated them. The dog shook himself and stood waiting for John. Rainwater splashed off John's glasses onto his nose and forehead. Clarice blurred. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his lenses. Without his glasses, Clarice was a familiar, indistinct outline.

"I have to walk Scotty around the block," he said. "He wouldn't understand if I just took him back to the house."

Beyond the dog, the drizzle broke the surface of the puddles in the street.

"I'll be there in a few minutes." John headed away from Clarice, the dog pulling at the leash.

When John and the dog stepped through the back door, John grabbed the towel from the hook behind the door and rubbed the dog's coat. The dog squirmed and tried to bite the towel. When John unhooked the leash, the dog bolted down the hall. Its claws clicked across the linoleum of the laundry room and kitchen and slipped on the hardwood as it turned and scrambled through the bedroom door.

John hung up his raincoat beside Clarice's and walked down the hall to the bedroom. Clarice was folding a t-shirt over an open suitcase on the bed. The dog stood beside the suitcase, wagging his tail.

John went back to the laundry room. A steady thumping came from the dryer. His canvas sneakers. The sweet smell of the dryer sheets filled the room. He opened the lid of the nearest worm bin,

sank his fingers into the compost, and let them rest there. The worms slid away from his fingers.

"I'll be staying with Sherry. Here's her number." Clarice stood in the doorway to the hall, holding out a slip of paper toward him.

He took the slip of paper with his free hand.

She leaned against the door frame with her arms folded and looked at him. Big gold letters spelling MICHIGAN draped across her breasts on the faded blue sweatshirt. His tennis shoes began to drum unevenly in the dryer.

He pulled a handful of mulch from the bin and rubbed it between his fingers. He always enjoyed changing the compost. In the summer he used the back porch. In the winter he used the kitchen floor. He moved the kitchen table over against the sink and spread a six foot by eight foot plastic tarp on the floor and dumped the contents of a bin on it. Then he separated the contents into cone-shaped piles and positioned a bright light above the piles. The process took about an hour for each of the three bins. Each time he put the roiling pile of worms into a bin full of fresh bedding, he gave them a new lease on life.

"What are you smiling about." Clarice said. The gold letters across her breasts rose and fell.

"Nothing," he said. "It's time to change the bedding."

Clarice didn't move. She looked at him as if she were waiting for him to say more. She smiled, the corners of her mouth hesitant. She went to the bedroom and came back out with the suitcase:

As she passed him, heading for the back door, she said, "Take your tennis shoes out of the dryer." She stopped and turned at the door. "The vibrations will bother the worms."

When the door shut behind her, he brushed the compost off his hand into the bin and replaced the lid. He watched through the glass pane in the upper half of the back door as Clarice's Mustang backed out of the carport and started down the drive. He had tuned the Mustang up less than a month earlier and rotated the tires. She'd be in good shape for a while.

The dog stood up against John's leg and wagged his tail.

"Just a minute, Scotty."

John opened the dryer door, and the thumping stopped. The sneakers were still damp, but he could hang them in the bathroom overnight. He laid them on top of the dryer and went into the kitchen. The dog nipped at his heels, and when John stopped in front of the cabinets, the dog stood on his hind legs with his front paws against the lower cabinet door and looked at John.

"Okay, Bud," John said as he opened the cabinet and reached for a can, "what will it be tonight? Chicken or beef?"

He had wanted to tell her about how it made him feel to be a good mechanic and to have a worm farm, to keep his shop in order, all the tools in place, the floor clean, no oil stains on the concrete. To know when the bedding in a bin needed changing just by the feel of it. In his mind it made perfect sense, but it never sounded right when he tried to say it. He couldn't find the right words.

It was complicated.

The electric can opener hanging from the bottom of the cabinet whirled as the can of dog food turned in his hand. When it stopped, he pulled the can away. The lid hung on the magnet. The heavy smell of chicken parts in gelatin made his nose wrinkle. He dumped

the dog food into the dog's bowl, rinsed out the can in the sink, then stepped on the pedal that raised the trash can lid, and dropped the empty dog food can and lid in.

The next day would be Sunday. He would bag up the trash first thing and put it on the porch ready to set out on Monday, then spend the rest of the morning changing the bedding in the worm bins. Wal Mart would be open. He might go get another 53-liter container. Something to pass the time.

She just needed time. Time to work through something. He didn't know what it was, but time was the answer.

He tried to imagine leaving, moving his shop to a place out on the highway. He liked the old neighborhood. The soft maples shading the front yards. The sidewalk broken up by the tree roots.

The owner of the El Dorado wouldn't pick the car up until Monday morning. If the sun was out Sunday afternoon, John would put the top down and take the Caddy for a final test drive. Go out by the lake, drive slow through the new housing addition. Maybe pull in the driveway and sit for a while. See how it felt. □